

Alice in Japan: Carter's Discovery of the Actual

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Abstract

Three stories published in *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974) are highly autobiographical works in which Angela Carter reflects imaginatively upon her Japan sojourn (1969-1972). "A Souvenir of Japan," "Flesh and the Mirror," and "The Smile of Winter" depict the British author's experience in Japan and gradual liberation from dualism. This presentation documents a sharp increase in the use of oxymoron in Carter's work published just after her stay in Japan, especially in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). It attempts to link this increase with Carter's observations on being in Japan, an experience which caused her to "become radicalized."

Carter's discovery of "the realm of the actual" in Japan is read through the lens of Alice Jardine's theory of feminine space in her *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985). Jardine argues that the breakdown of the grand ideological narratives of the West is essentially a masculine problem, as women were not involved in the construction of these philosophical schemes. Carter's discovery of the actual in the mirrors of Japan is linked to Jardine's suggestion that the realm of *embodiment* will be one of the feminine spaces remaining as semantic possibilities in a philosophically bankrupt West.

The stories explore Japan from the point of view of a Western woman and observe a masculinity which is passive and feminine despite a domineering patriarchal system, a world beyond the mirror in which every value is weighted with the burden of its opposite, and the body seen for the first time in a mirror stripped of its ideality.

I will read *Passion of New Eve* using the theory of *Gynesis: Configurations of woman and modernity* by Alice A. Jardine. The following is the quotation from the book in which Jardine talks about the collapse of the Western metaphysical system and

the feminine space which is a mystery/God/silence to men in the patriarchal logocentric system. Carter encountered the mystery of “the space that is coded as feminine” in Japan. I would like to demonstrate how it was Carter’s experience in Japan, as reported in her essays and stories, which resulted in her increasing use of oxymoron especially in *The Passion of New Eve*.

As Asian academics involved in the literature of the West, it has always been part of our burden to understand the philosophical underpinning of European and American literature as well as the literary criticism that has been used to examine it. In the last thirty years this criticism has become increasingly complex as Western “master narratives,” both philosophical and theological, have broken down and led to an increasingly sophisticated literary theory that attempts to deal with this vacuum. Alice Jardine, an American literary critic, has articulated for academics in her own country the contours of French feminist criticism, a body of work quite different from Anglo-American feminist literary theory. One of the chief differences between this Anglophone and Francophone work is that the latter has focused on and problematized modernity and shown how modernity, with its eradication of the gods and centralization of the human ego, has been as much a masculine construct as the elaborate theological systems which preceded it. French feminist criticism has identified a space outside of this logocentric system coded as feminine. As Jardine explains for us,

The key master discourses in the West – philosophy, religion, history – have thus had to confront, since the nineteenth century, a new space which refuses to stay silent within its frame of representation. This nature – this space, object, and Other

– is, in a sense, no longer natural. It is described as the motor of a world without a God. What is henceforth necessary for any human subject who desires to describe the modern world will be to walk through the mirror, dismantle the frame held together by the Big Dichotomies and operate a trans-position of the boundaries and spaces now tangled in a figurative confusion. The inside and outside seem to turn inside-out like a glove. Even history cannot name the resultant relining, for this Master of the Masters has itself turned capricious. (“Spaces for Further Research: Male Paranoia” p.88)

My interest in this presentation is to use Jardine’s theory as a way of illuminating one strand in the work of Angela Carter, the British novelist who was so popular in the last two decades of the twentieth century that the number of theses dealing with her in British institutions was said to outweigh the number on Shakespeare. I want to show how Carter’s two-year sojourn in Japan constituted a walking through the mirrors described by Jardine above, a stay in a new Wonderland for a new Alice.

Carter chose to go to Japan when she received the Somerset Maugham prize which sent the winner abroad. She lived in Japan for a couple of years from 1969 to 1972. In her essay, “Oriental Romances –Japan” Carter says, “I wanted to live for a while in a culture that is not now nor has ever been a Judaeo-Christian one, to see what it was like.”(*Nothing Sacred*,28) Carter came to Japan and found herself in an actual space outside of the Western metaphysical system. For Carter, the Tokyo into which she was thrown as a western woman, must have been a mirrored world where everything looked inside-out. In Tokyo Carter had to face the reality of her former subjectivity being

erased, first of all, and then observe what came to replace it from this non-logocentric space.

Carter had to rethink a variety of parameters as she became absorbed in a culture where gender borders seemed ambiguous; gender codes didn't match her those of her previous experiences, while at the same time patriarchal elements worked in a different way. Japan has been notorious as an apparently patriarchal society, but it also has a tradition of infiltrating gender borders. Japan's arts, such as Kabuki, have been a transsexual space, with men crossdressing and playing female roles. Even Yamatotakeru, the hero who is said to have founded Japan dressed as a woman. Love affairs between Buddhist priests and the boys dressed as women were not uncommon. There were the gay quarters for the catamites during Edo-period. In Kabuki the idealized woman's role is played by men, another infiltration of gender borders. Carter's androgynous characters in *Passion of New Eve*, written in 1977 after her stay in Japan, owe much to her observation of the gender-bending world of the rising sun.

Tatsuru Uchida argues that such gender-infiltration merely strengthens the walls between the genders in his book, *What do women desire?* I suppose that this tradition of encouraging gender-infiltration only served to stimulate and strengthen the patriarchal phenomenon in Japan. In fact Carter found a vibrant femininity in Japanese men which she never experienced at home in the U.K. She began to wonder if gender borders were more ambiguous than she had previously believed. Tristessa, one of the main characters in *The Passion of New Eve*, and also a disguised actress, is adored as an ideal woman, and must have come from images of Kabuki actors. In fact

artificial Kabuki women not only possess more femininity than actual women but also set the standard of femininity for other women in general.

Three short stories, “A Souvenir of Japan,” “Flesh and the Mirror” and “The Smile of Winter” appeared in the collection *Fireworks*; these are Carter’s seemingly semi-autobiographical stories. Let me read a quotation from “Flesh and the Mirror” in which Carter’s protagonist sees her actual, physical self reflected in the ceiling mirror of a love hotel in Tokyo. Listen to Carter’s musings on the habitual and actual selves:

The mirror distilled the essence of all the encounters of strangers whose perceptions of one another existed only in the medium of the chance embrace, the accidental. During the durationless time we spent making love, we were not ourselves, whoever that might have been, but in some sense the ghosts of ourselves. But the selves we were not, the selves of our own habitual perceptions of ourselves, had a far more insubstantial substance than the reflections we were. The magic mirror presented me with a hitherto unconsidered notion of myself as I. Without any intention of mine, I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror. I beset me. I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror. I was not watching it. There was nothing whatsoever beyond the surface of the glass. Nothing kept me from the fact, the act; I had been precipitated into knowledge of the real conditions of living. (*Fireworks*, 64)

The protagonist finds the actuality of her physical self in a ceiling mirror in a love hotel which she enters with a stranger after her real boy friend fails to materialize. She realized that, until that moment in the love hotel, she had just seen what she wanted

to see, her ideal or less-than-ideal image in the mirror, a habitual notion of the self. Carter dwells on this discovery of her physical actuality in the story, and this is a significant moment in the story as we read Carter through the lens of Jardine's theory, for the actual is one aspect of the feminine space neglected by the logocentric, patriarchal system which preferred the ideal, Platonic chair to the actual one sitting in the kitchen. The physical actuality Carter discovers in the mirror is neither the ideal body defined and desired by men nor the ideal feminine image handed down from mother to daughter. It is simply her physical actuality, glimpsed for the first time. The mirror is a symbolic tool in this story as well as other Carter stories.

In "Japanese Souvenir" the narrator is annoyed by her Japanese boy friend's negativity. He invites her to go to see a fireworks display at the river, but also makes it clear that he really doesn't want to go. He asked her, 'Are you happy? Are you sure you're happy?' (*Fireworks*, 2) He is doing it for her, but he wants to remind her that he himself is not enjoying it. This half-sulking behavior is something she has associated more with women than with men. She finds that Japanese men have more feministic elements than Western women do, and seem to enjoy a rather masochistic joy by manipulating themselves into an apparently "abused" situation. This realization led her to write *The Sadeian Woman*, (1979) in which she declares "Masochism and sadism are different sides of the same coin, and perhaps a repressive culture can only be maintained by a strong masochistic element among the repressed" ("Nothing Sacred," 38). Carter gradually realized everything and everyone has two opposite sides at the same time, just like the mirror. My thesis is that such experiences and realizations led Carter to indulge widely in the figure of oxymoron and to introduce a good deal of

androgyny in *The Passion of New Eve*.

Tristessa, the character mentioned above in *The Passion of New Eve* was a transvestite who succeeded in becoming the most desirable woman. By dressing as a woman, he too infiltrates the gender borders. Both Tristessa and Eve, the protagonist in the novel who is transformed from a man to a woman, are androgynous. There is no clear distinction between male or female. This amorphous state where sex and gender don't match is the fledgling feminism Carter developed in the male-dominated society of Japan. This experience in Japan made Carter see the artificial relativity of Christian dualism and feel more attraction for Buddhism, where human beings can be reborn even as animals or with sex changes. In dualism there is nothing between good and bad, spirit and flesh, or man and woman. Carter had discovered the existence of a more ambiguous state of things.

Carter used her new knowledge in *The Passion of New Eve*, in which each character is symbolic. Carter changed 'Father's time, mother's species,' (89) by Joyce, the English modernist, into 'Time is a man, space is a woman. Time is a killer. Kill time and live forever,' and put these adages into the very structure of Beulah, a community consisting completely of women in *The Passion of New Eve*. The goddesses in Beulah intended to revive the myth in which women control the world (although most of the residents seem rather androgynous).

Alice Jardine, in the chapter quoted from above, defines male paranoia like this: "Male paranoia involves, fundamentally, the fear of the loss either of all boundaries or

of those boundaries becoming too painfully constrictive. And this encounter with boundaries is almost always described by men as an encounter with what is called “God” – that being who has no boundaries.” (98) Japanese men may have escaped from male paranoia, and their boundary might not involve any recognizable God, but they are ruled by the consciousness of others. What others think about you is more important than God for Japanese. The others are gods for them. Therefore transforming himself into a woman is agreeable in himself if the others admit their existence. In this way Carter found an actual space outside of the metaphysical system. Jardine wrote about the case of President Schreber, who is one of Freud’s most famous cases, as an example of male paranoia, and a perfect representation of the crisis of knowledge intrinsic to modernity.

Schreber (also) believed that the world was coming to an end: “Schreber became convinced of the imminence of a great catastrophe, of the end of the world.” He alone could restore it to its lost state of bliss, but only by transforming himself into a “woman.” Therefore, “Schreber inverts the phallogocentric circuit in order to place himself in the region (space) of ‘receptivity’”, or, rather he must become totally self-sufficient – he must become his own mother and father, totally self-productive: “when I speak of my duty to go deeper into voluptuous pleasures, I never mean by sexual commerce, but I imagine myself man and woman in one person in the process of making love to myself... but that has nothing to do with the idea of masturbation.” This ultimate denial of sexual difference is attributed by Freud to Schreber’s (repressed) passive homosexuality – his desire to be God’s wife. It might also be linked to the necessity of his becoming God’s son (Christ the Savior) – that ultimately

feminine figure. That is, the desire to be both woman and spirit (both matter and form, self-created – an automaton?) may be the only way to avoid becoming the object of the Other's (female's) desire; it allows the complete abandonment of object-love, an existence in-between, in a perpetual state of "Passion."(98-99)

Carter experimented with this subject in her novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Eve had once abandoned his lover Leila like an object when she was a man, Evelyn. Then he was reformed into a woman, Eve, the desirable form, and avoided becoming 'the object of Other's (female's) desire.' Eve became God's wife. God in this novel turned out to be Goddess (Mother) and also Leila's mother. By making Eve, a transformed woman and Tristessa, a man dressed as a woman, a married couple, Carter created this 'totally self-productive' state.

Carter escaped from modernity by finding actual herself in an outer space in Japan and, it helped her to make androgyny in *The Passion of New Eve* as she became free from metaphysical burden in Western world. One of the characters named Zero, who symbolizes the patriarchal society itself is killed and diminished into zero as his name showed from the beginning. Goddess (Mother) herself is, however in agony even at the end of the story. Carter seemed sure that the ideal world should be androgynous. Oxymoron is the most suitable linguistic device for an androgynous society. Carter must have faced the unbearable lightness of being in Japan, which might have become the trigger to make her a stern feminist and create a lot of oxymoron in *The Passion of New Eve*. It was the reversed process that the modernism was born in the unbearable heaviness of being in Western society.

Oxymoron is a denial of common sense or a breakthrough of conservative knowledge about gender features or the gender roles. It can be a shock remedy for sexist people or even for would-be liberal people who still set their minds on an authorized sense of values. Mother is a symbolic existence in this novel and described like “a **sacred monster**,” “**fully clothed in obscene nakedness**,” or “The moon the **virgin** mother patroness of **harlots**,” which are all oxymoron. (The expression of oxymoron is expressed in bigger words.)

In this novel oxymoron is used most to express Mother, who is the goddess of human beings, but has the opposite image of the Virgin Mary. That shows the obvious intention of Carter, who tried to rewrite the whole of human history written by men and to create an original history from the beginning. It means the debasement of the Bible. In this novel she could have realized the ideal world for women and even for men. Oxymoron is important because it can be said to be a tool of feminist fighting. It is a denial of the sense of values decided by patriarchal society.

In the book named 「女は何を欲望するか」 (*What do women desire?*) Tatsuru Uchida explains that from the anatomical point of view the dual gender of binary opposition doesn't exist, but there are many cases where external genital organs become very small or huge. Furthermore there are androgynous who has both genital organs. In either case in the realm of nature we can see just the diversity and continuity, not the exclusive gender. The sex border is proved to be just the provisional appearance. Uchida proves that the gender identity of cultural system has priority to biological sex.

We have variety of stories concerning gender fluctuation. The medical research proves that whichever gender they choose they are to serve the reinforcement of gender construction. Those who transcend the border of the gender by changing their physical characteristics, become other sex in conventional way. They never want gender concept to disappear, but contrary these gender-infiltrations strengthen the clearer gender construction. This theory of Uchida explains why Japanese society has kept its patriarchy systems for a long time, having a lot of gender-infiltrations.

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